

## "INTERVIEW WITH JACK HEDLEY"

---

A man with a past, Jack Hedley, the TV ferryman, once led a completely different life. A ruthless existence. It changed him into a different person.

---

Pepita looks at us with her beady eyes from behind the bright green door. That's the way of life in this rather classy London district where the door is answered by servants. The lord of the manor always makes you wait five minutes before making his entrance. Then Jack Hedley appears. An engaging gentleman with a familiar face. Not only from the ferryman but .....

"Colditz" says Hedley. "I was the English commander of the war prisoners in the TV series Colditz." Gentleman Hedley pokes up the fire in the grate, but then the phone rings again. We listen in.

"Isn't that being filmed in Istanbul? Oh, I see. So it's Rome or Budapest? Well, I'll just wait and see. I'll hear from you. Goodbye."

It's clear that "Story"\* is the guest of one of Britain's leading actors. "I'm getting so many interesting offers" he says modestly, "this is a film that might take me abroad as soon as next week. That's why I never go on holidays. While we were filming "Who Pays the Ferryman" I spent several months in Crete. It's only then you realize the kind of influence the Greek islands have on people. I lost all sense of time there. I used to read the Times every day. Without his Times, Jack was a very nervous man. When I returned from Crete I cancelled my subscription. I even stopped doing the political program I presented on television. The peaceful atmosphere in Crete showed me the relativity of certain things. Politics is full of lies and bla-bla-bla, so are the papers that write about it.

Pepita tries to serve coffee as unobtrusively as possible. Hedley lights a cigar with flourish and lays back in the pastel colored cushions on the sofa. No television in the room, only lots of books and a whole wall decorated with China, his wife's collection.

Jack is a remarkable man, a relaxed gentleman. But he looks older than his forty eight years. Perhaps he's had a hard life?

Hedley smiles. "I have led a rather hectic life. It all started when London was bombed during the war. That's the kind of nightmare you never forget. You'd do anything to rid yourself of it. So, after a time, what did I go and do? I joined the army, admittedly in peace time, but obviously it was my way of coping with the events of my youth.

He signed up for nine years as a marine with the navy. His military career took him to the most dangerous places in the world at the time, such as India and Korea.

"I was in India when two and a half million people died of famine. The name Korea says enough by itself. It gave me a lot of insight. There I was, surrounded by misery and pain and I was taking part in all these horrifying events." He stares at the fire for a long time, as if the flames can obliterate the surging memories. He continues his philosophy.

"The advantage of peace time was the enormous amount of spare time I suddenly had. So I took up studying. However the more I learnt, the more

distance I put between myself and the main reason I joined up with the navy in the first place. That's why I quit, I couldn't take any more.

And now here he is, in his exquisite London dwelling every bit the leading British actor. Quite a difference.

"After I first left the army I was walking the streets with my heart out on my sleeve. I didn't know what to do. I'd studied history but didn't want to take up teaching. Quite by accident I passed by the Royal Academy, the theatre school. That seemed like a possibility and I was lucky, they took me on. That was the end of his turbulent life as a marine. There was a place for him in society, Jack Hedley finally became a human being. "I never had a difficult time in the army, I was never attacked by planes or anything like that. All the same, I never want to touch a gun again. Most of my friends hunt, shooting pheasants. I never join them, I don't even do that anymore."

In Korea I saw the stupidity of war and I asked myself why I was there and I suddenly realized that it was due to a mistake made by the former American president Roosevelt. We were risking our lives for the sake of a mistake made by a sick old man. Then you start asking yourself : what am I doing here?"

Now he is happy with his wife and two sweet, young children. His wife, Mathilda, is 35 but has the stamina of a young girl. "She's been participating in car rallies for the past several months. She tears through mud and dust with her small car and loves it. She can do what she likes, says Hedley, it makes no difference to him. He has a fine family, a lovely home and a successful career in the theatre. But every now and then his past catches up with him. Even now it suddenly comes to the foreground, it follows him around like a shadow. "Sometimes, when I look in the mirror, I say to myself : was that you, heavily armed and traipsing around in the jungle? Then I just can't imagine it because I've changed so much. I refuse to believe that I was that young soldier. I ask myself: how could anyone have been so stupid?"

It 's on his mind continuously. It's the reason why he's a regular visitor to a home for disabled war veterans in Richmond. A form of charity but also a constant confrontation with his past.

"They were young men when they lost their limbs", says Jack dejectedly. "On a lovely, sunny day they're taken out in their wheelchairs and what do they see? Shining Mercedes cars whisking by, well dressed people, and they themselves are just sitting there. Badly mutilated when they were just youngsters. All they can do is observe the happiness and freedom they gained for others. I think if I was in their shoes I'd be incredibly angry.

He throws the butt of his cigar in the fire, his features relax. A smile breaks through as he says: "Aren't we having a serious conversation".

**Translated from Dutch to English by Anna Pereboom  
for the Michael J Bird Tribute Website**

<http://www.mjbird.org.uk>